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Reframing Victimhood And Blame: Post-9/11 Trauma, Stereotyping, And Counter-Discursive Narratives In Contemporary Literature

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Abstract

In today's post-9/11 era, writers use fiction to explore new ideas about victims and blame by describing trauma, identity, and the confusion about doing what is right. This study focuses on Jess Walter's The Zero, Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist, and Yasmina Khadra's The Attack to see how these stories avoid the usual divisions between innocent and guilty or us and them. It is revealed through analysis that The Zero highlights the breakdown of American institutions and a loss of morals, and The Reluctant Fundamentalist describes the challenges faced by Muslims in the West due to alienation and stereotyping. It also debunks usual stereotypes by showing the human side of its Arab character and highlighting the painful effects of being accepted only under certain conditions. All three authors use narrative pieces that never fully finish, suggesting the many struggles and social isolation that come with identity issues after trauma. By changing the focus of victimhood and blame, these books introduce new ideas that challenge major and widely accepted versions of the attacks, motivating readers to consider their values, background, and sympathy for what followed 9/11.

Keywords: Post-9/11 literature, Blame, Trauma, Stereotyping, Counter-Discourse, *The Zero, The Reluctant Fundamentalist, The Attack*, Identity, Moral Ambiguity

Introduction

The attacks on September 11, 2001, greatly changed the global political environment and influenced the way people around the world discuss security, who they are, and their sense of belonging. As a result, the world saw a huge number of stories about good and bad, insiders and outsiders, and people who suffered versus those who caused the suffering (Alsultany, 2012). Quickly, these ideas became part of political speeches, news reports, and popular culture, which resulted in the global othering of Arabs and Muslims. Fear and suspicion became common in many fields, and writers dealt with the consequences of shared trauma and accusations by exploring ethical, psychological, and political themes in their works. Works about 9/11 by Western and diasporic writers sometimes echo typical ideology and at other times challenge it. The story follows Brian Remy, a former New York City police officer who is traumatized and has psychological dissociation after the attacks. The way Walter writes the story reflects how mixed up Remy's thoughts are, which reflects the same confusion in the world around them. Here, Walter points out that the American government uses trauma to excuse unjustified surveillance, racial profiling, and violence for national security

(Crawford, 2013; Brewin, 2011). It explores how the difference between right and wrong in the United States is sometimes unclear, showing how easily someone with unresolved trauma can become both the wrongdoer and the victim.

Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007) is different in that it shows the disillusionment of a Pakistani protagonist named Changez. At first, Changez does well in elite American institutions, but after 9/11, he changes a lot, and the book shows how easy it is for anyone to lose their position in such a society. Hamid uses dramatic monologue, making readers participate more closely in Changez's mind—this shifts the narrative spotlight to a marginalized Muslim voice and changes the usual Western fiction style (Spivak, 1988; Gopal, 2011). His decision to abandon the American Dream is not based on ideology but on realizing the racism, exploitation, and injustice hidden under America's image of exceptionalism. Similarly, Yasmina Khadra's The Attack (2005) examines the identity and mental state of Arabs living in Israel. Dr. Amin Jaafari, an Arab-Israeli doctor who has adopted a Jewish identity, is confused and a bit lost after finding out his wife killed herself in a suicide bombing. The story focuses on Amin trying to understand what led to his actions, and this journey takes him deep inside the Palestinian resistance. Khadra does not see terrorism as a permanent trait, but as a response to social injustice and ongoing difficulties from the past (Khoudi & Guendouzi, 2021). She opposes the essentialist ideas about terrorists by portraying real people instead of labels.

All three books use different techniques to probe and reform the limited ideas brought up after September 11. While The Zero demonstrates that the foundations of morality in America have fallen apart, The Reluctant Fundamentalist and The Attack ask readers to see Arabs and Muslims as human and affected by the world's injustices and their personal experiences. They bypass the usual blame game by arguing that trauma does not excuse unethical actions and that looking for justice should benefit the wronged person and help others reflect on their own behavior, not see the wrongdoers punished (Puar, 2007; Rothschild & Keefer, 2017).A shared quality in the novels is the authors' use of many short scenes and internal ruminations to illustrate the broken state of society after 9/11. The disorder in the storyline of The Zero shows how Brian and society are both confused and part of the nation's increasing moral corruption. Likewise, Hamid and Khadra keep some aspects of the story open-ended to frustrate the reader's wish to finish with a firm ending. The unresolved nature of international issues and changing values after 9/11 is also shown by the way this structural indeterminacy is written (LaCapra, 2001; Tazartez, 2011). These methods motivate readers to realize that understanding humans is difficult and that easy moral answers are not enough.

They also reveal how the media help create and spread stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims. Walter criticizes how the news can cause people to fear and support false narratives, but Hamid and Khadra bring to life individuals who are directly affected by these kinds of media-induced perceptions (Alsultany, 2012; Shaheen, 2001). In The Reluctant Fundamentalist and The Attack, ordinary individuals are accused due to racial profiling and being connected to wrongdoers, highlighting how Islamophobia by the state and media can be cruel to people. In the end, books are a strong way for readers to think about ethics and offer counterarguments to common stories. Because they show morally controversial figures and avoid easy answers, these stories urge readers to look closely at how trauma, blame, and identity are shaped by psychology and politics. Walter, Hamid, and Khadra point out major questions as a way to participate in post-9/11 discourse, rather than trying to solve anything. Who is responsible for the guilt? How can societies recover if they do not first face their contradictions? They involve literary ideas as well as important political and existential themes.

The paper studies The Zero, The Reluctant Fundamentalist, and The Attack to see how they act as literary responses to prevailing post-9/11 views. The novels show that innocence and guilt are never clear by themselves and urge readers to focus on the complicated effects of violence and miscommunication. They present both accounts of trauma and ways to engage ethically and reflect on social issues now that fear, nationalism, and tensions around the world are growing.

Deconstructing Blame in Jess Walter's *The Zero*

The Zero (2006) by Jess Walter is a satirical look at how, in the wake of 9/11, America rushed to find someone to blame and endorsed questionable decisions. Brian Remy, who becomes the book's main character, is a New York police officer with psychological issues caused by surviving 9/11. His confusion about the timeline and his unreliable memories resemble the divided feelings of the country. Through Remy's psychological problems, Walter illustrates how grief-stricken, afraid, and uncertain groups may blame others to take control once more (Brewin, 2011). The storytelling method, which jumps from one time to another and seems confusing, marks the confusion and cultural upheaval that happened after the attacks, making it hard to deal with trauma using simplistic comparisons. Society uses blame to help deal with problems and stresses. Rather than examining the country's own roles or the geopolitical background of the attacks, the U.S. government and media decided to focus on blaming Arabs and Muslims right away. He makes the point that Remy, rather than clearly being a victim, is caught up in a counterterrorism activity with morally dubious results. His involvement in monitoring others and questioning proves that trauma can confuse one's judgment and make victims act as perpetrators. Bloom (2010) points out that blaming external forces is a way to make sense of things and soothe inner anxieties (p. 87).

It further shows readers how both officials and the media help to blame the media for the crisis. Walter demonstrates the impact of sensationalist reporting on shaping an identity based on fear and getting revenge. Showing the use of the media by the police commissioner and the popularity of media soundbites, the novel shows that fear-mongering was a way to support taking away civil liberties. After 9/11, these two groups are often presented in comics as the archetypal villains, repeating the way they are often shown in real-life news (Alsultany, 2012). They contribute to the public fearing crime, justifying racial profiling, and making people believe suspicion is an act of patriotism, which keeps the cycle of discrimination and fear going.
Remy's mental confusion stands for the way that memories and identities are broken apart in the country. The book points out that trauma causes writers to emphasize emotional comfort over real details in their historical stories. Brewin (2011) points out that traumatic events may result in parts of memories being encoded differently, which can cause people to recall events in an altered way (p. 204). The main character forgetting what he has done highlights how society can support decisions it considers wrong and fails to see their wrongness. Wanting to get revenge and protect the nation leads people to forget the past quickly.

Walter describes blame as a way for us to displace our feelings, which is consistent with psychological views on moral injury. His psychological crisis occurs because he unknowingly plays a part in ethically wrong things. The psychological distress Conrad shows in the story matches what Litz et al. (2009) call "moral injury," resulting from violating strongly held values under the influence of an institution (p. 700). Such a depiction shows that when blame is used to avoid responsibility, it harms the targets and reduces the character of the blamer. Both Remy and those around him experience a moral decline in The Zero, showing the dual damage. The book also looks at how surveillance and militarization play a part in blame within institutions. The story demonstrates that as Remy gets tangled up in secret activities, agencies pretend to be doing it for national security and use fear to win more power. Akram and Karmely (2004) mention that the USA PATRIOT Act put into place suspicion, so Arab and Muslim communities began to be regularly watched, without going through the proper legal process (p. 617). Walter makes clear that these new situations reflect his warnings of a dominant force that puts paranoia in place of vigilance and repression instead of accountability. The fact that surveillance is commonplace in the narrative highlights how accusing people can become a regular practice in bureaucracy, which makes it tougher to address or reverse.

Walter is not interested in making solutions simple. In this book, The Zero argues that using blame as a stand-in for justice does not work. The fact that violence and suspicion repeat themselves in the novel shows how revenge justice is pointless. Crawford (2013) believes that vengeance justified as justice usually brings about the destruction of the morals it is trying to defend. Remy's story – from being a survivor to being involved in the law's actions – demonstrates how unresolved blame can stop healing and keep things divided. Instead of easing tension, the writing leads them to consider how they may be contributing to the problems it portrays. In the end, The Zero looks at how America dealt with trauma following 9/11, but through a morally problematic perspective. Walter alerts readers to the risks of scapegoating and how institutions can be involved, asking them to review the ethical aspects of their country's actions. Using irony, splitting the story, and exploring mental collapse, he suggests that blaming innocent individuals, while covering up fear, actually

weakens the values a community seeks to defend. With the novel, the author is also warning readers to consider ethical issues during crises.

Victimhood and Complicity

Jess Walter uses The Zero to examine how the events following 9/11 left many situations ethically gray and questioned the idea that only some people are clearly guilty or innocent. With the character of Brian Remy, the story shows that it is not clear-cut what is right when the country is in emotional turmoil. At first, her success in the competition is secured by her reputation as a survivor and first responder, but over time, she does things that raise ethical issues. His involvement shows that trauma can cloud a person's sense of right and wrong and bring them close to behaving like a perpetrator (Herman, 1997). Walter's decision to make his hero guilty complicates the simple belief that the United States was always right. In his memoir, Walter disputes the usual belief that Americans were pure victims of the dreadful strikes of terrorism. Throughout The Zero, Remy begins to participate in covert spying and brutal interrogations which makes it difficult for him to claim he is better than others. The character demonstrates the mixed effects of trauma as he wants to fight wrongdoing but can also be ruthless. Altwaiji (2023) points out that the mixed feelings of morality that followed 9/11 "show how the nation was struggling with its own conflicting values" (p. 178). Remy acts as an example of how society tends to equate law enforcement with toughness and justice with freedom from consequence.

He argues that it is not necessary to have suffered to be right about what is morally right. Rather, he claims that, when trauma is not processed, it can drive people into harmful behavior that replicates the violence they first experienced. By showing Remy's story, the author shows that empowered survivors can unwittingly contribute to the harm caused by institutions. This insight is similar to what Rothschild and Keefer's (2017) research found on scapegoating and moral displacement, describing how societies shrug off their own guilt and anxiety onto an outside party to help them stay united and righteous (p. 215). Remy's involvement highlights that those who suffer can also cause suffering, mainly when systems use their pain for political motives. Walter points out that the way the country responded to 9/11 destroyed itself and also punished other countries. In the novel, the government's actions, like increasing surveillance, turning streets into military zones, and punishing those who challenge authority, are shown as more ruled by fears and the desire to appear powerful than by reason and ethics. These policies push aside marginalized groups and also reduce the civil liberties of many people. As Puar (2007) notes, the claim of innocence for a nation comes undone when actual wrongdoing and poor choices are made visible (p. 132). Remy struggles with his split identity, showing the same kind of internal dilemma faced by the nation.

He emphasizes that the way collective memory is built often supports and helps spread exclusionary ideas. After 9/11, many post-9/11 memorials worked to conceal opinions that disagreed with them, highlighting the pain and sacrifice without letting any room for criticism. Because Remy's memories are scattered, this seems to represent the collective silence about the results of the brutality they used. Collective memory can be influenced, according to Connerton (2008), to support popular beliefs and hide some historical facts (p. 62). The Zero uses this kind of selective memory to help institutions maintain injustice by using trauma for their own benefit. Walter shows, through Remy's confusion, that trauma can cause people to lose their sense of morality and change what they consider right and wrong. The reason the protagonist loses their moral sense over time is not that they are naturally bad, but because of the harsh environment and psychological trauma. According to Brewin (2011), the trauma causes the brain to misfire and lose the ability to truly feel and understand emotions, which results in less empathy and a reduced sense of right and wrong (p. 204). This psychological approach, by showing how teams and individuals lose their sense of right and wrong during long-lasting stress and fear, strengthens the political criticism in the novel.

Characters aside from the main ones in The Zero often swing between being victims and being involved in the crimes. He describes members of the police, civil servants, and media joining in victimhood while contributing to the oppression of others. They use arguments about national security and helping the country to excuse wrongdoing, demonstrating how 9/11 allowed authorities to go beyond what was permitted. According to Resano (2015), "Walter's characters often show how the difference between a defender and an abuser is not always easy to see if society's injuries are not handled" (p. 125). Therefore, the novel illustrates the sorts of ethical problems that arise in societies recovering from trauma. The Zero eventually delivers a

strong stance against the simple moral choices that shaped thinking after 9/11. Walter challenges readers to think again about the role of heroism and the ethics of getting revenge, thanks to examples where first responders and public officials support injustice. Because Brian Remy is both victimized and violent, readers must reconsider their beliefs about morality, identity, and being responsible in times of national crisis. The book says that to truly heal and provide justice, we must look at our own mistakes, accept things that are not easy to define, and resist the one-sided stories that appear after tragic events.

Counter-Discourses in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Attack*

The Attack (2005) and The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007) are different from The Zero in that they present views that question the way the West represents Arabs and Muslims after 9/11. Most of these novels tell stories from people living outside the center of Western power—whose personalities are affected, challenged, and finally revived because of exclusion, racial stereotypes, and mistrust. Hamid and Khadra use Changez and Dr. Amin Jaafari to explore the emotional, political, and social impacts of being seen as terrorists or different from the majority.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist, by Mohsin Hamid, is told from Changez's perspective as he explains to an American in Lahore how his trust in America was lost. The story is told without the reader seeing or hearing anything else, so the reader feels closer to Changez's thoughts, breaking the Western focus (as discussed by Spivak in 1988). When the story opens, Changez is a Princeton graduate at a valued investment company, realizing the American Dream. At the same time, the events of 9/11 and the culture of fear that emerges afterward cause a major identity crisis. The increasing growth of his beard—seen as a cultural and personal link—is misunderstood by others as a threat, showing the underlying racial attitudes towards Muslims in the West (Alsultany, 2012). Changez feels isolated not only socially, but also in his views: he starts questioning what makes America different and special, as well as the importance of capitalism. Because he left America's corporate environment and went back to Pakistan, many believe he was becoming radicalized. The story makes it clear that Changez turns away from his old life in protest, not out of a desire to support extremism (Gopal, 2011). He points out that American actions in other countries in the Global South, for example, are examples of economic imperialism. The events in Chile and his increasing recognition of global capitalism's unfairness cause him to change his political views. In the character of Changez, Hamid argues that meritocracy is unrealistic and that inequality is a key factor in the world after 9/11.

Similarly, Yasmina Khadra's novel The Attack looks at how Arabs feel insecure about their identity when living in an Israeli society. Dr. Once Amin discovers his wife Sihem has become a suicide bomber, he feels he must reconsider if he truly belongs in his new world. This discovery destroys Amin's positive image as an accepted professional and makes it clear how far conditional acceptance can go in a society that judges by ethnicity (Khoudi & Guendouzi, 2021). Throughout the novel, the character feels heartbreak and uncertainty, but he also learns about politics as he tries to understand why his wife became radical. Assimilating does not prevent individuals from facing the suspicion of the system. Even though he has always worked for and supported Israel, he suddenly finds himself scrutinized and mistrusted by many. His friends and fellow citizens start to believe he is a threat, showing that people's identity based on religion or ethnicity can take priority over other connections. Just as many Muslims and Arabs found themselves treated as outsiders in the U.S. after 9/11, despite their integration and achievements (Cainkar, 2009), this sudden change has revealed the experience of many Chinese. Khadra points out that, under such rules, even a very westernized Arab can immediately be excluded because of what someone else has done.

Both authors show how being labeled and seen as a terrorist can turn someone into something less than human. The Reluctant Fundamentalist shows that Changez is targeted with minor acts of racism, while Amin in The Attack is assumed guilty by others because of what he is. By telling these stories, they break the idea that guilt should be given to people simply because of their ethnicity, and they reveal the harm this does to people and groups. Peek (2011) shows that Muslims in the United States were closely monitored, questioned, and excluded after the attacks, which is also reflected in Changez's and Amin's lives. In addition, Hamid and Khadra use gaps in their storytelling to avoid having readers arrive at a simple moral judgment. The book ends in a way that the reader never knows for sure if the listener is dangerous, which represents the tense atmosphere between the East and West after 9/11. Amin never discovers the reason behind Sihem's radicalism, because outsiders cannot easily grasp the causes of this phenomenon. Because these endings are

left unfinished, the reader is forced to face uncomfortable feelings and not just choose between right and wrong (Khedim et al., 2022).

Both novels underline that Arabs and Muslims have the right to present their own stories, identities, and sorrows against the usual stereotypes that cast them as simple threats. Hamid and Khadra use Changez and Amin to illustrate how big personal changes are possible due to the hardships of being a foreigner, the effects of violence and acts of dishonesty, and not just because of their culture or faith. They oppose the main Western ideas by asking readers to feel empathy, consider their opinions, and break down simple stereotypes.

Humanization and Narrative Agency

One of the best things about The Reluctant Fundamentalist and The Attack is their strong effort to break the common stereotype that Muslims or Arabs are terrorists. The authors of these novels avoid treating their main characters stereotypically by highlighting their inner lives, complexity and how they think. Hamid and Khadra present Changez and Amin Jaafari as people struggling with their identities, grief and place in the world, so that readers can regard them as real humans affected by large-scale forces. Since many communities are distorted in mainstream media, the narrative approach not only supports ethics but also undermines political authority by giving their stories back to them (Shaheen, 2001). By using a dramatic monologue, Mohsin Hamid makes sure readers interact directly with what Changez is saying and feeling. By adopting this method, the usual pattern of Western interpreters defining Arab or Muslim characters is dismantled. Changez tells his story to an unnamed American and because the American is silent, readers can insert their own thoughts and worries into the narrative. The story is shaped so that the Muslim character talks without interruption and the Western subject simply listens in a passive and vague manner (Spivak, 1988). As the reader listens to Changez, they start to examine their own ideas, since Changez is struggling with the American dream and pulling away from America.

In his writing, Hamid does not make Changez out to be a villain or a stereotype. Although Changez is not radicalized in the usual way, he neither joins any armed groups nor approves of violence. Through "fundamentalism," he advocates going back to cultural traditions and becoming more aware of one's own ethics. He criticizes the way America deals with foreign affairs and cuts business deals around the world, yet his criticism is intellectual and restrained. Instead of becoming a fanatic, the alienation turns into an awareness of social injustice. Roy (2020) explains that the novel gives an alternative viewpoint because it disagrees that anyone who feels unfulfilled by life will become radicalized. Much like Henry Porter, Yasmina Khadra's The Attack highlights the personal and emotional problems that follow from violence instead of emphasizing the dramatic aspects. By telling the story from a third-person limited point of view, the narrative lets readers see Amin Jaafari learn about his wife Sihem's decision to carry out a suicide bombing. Because the story is told like a detective hunt, readers are able to accompany Amin as he seeks answers, turning the incident of terrorism into something personal and very sad. This technique helps explain why Amin feels so much pain, and it also allows the audience to relate to Sihem, whose decision to join a radical group is influenced by enduring oppression, loss, and disenfranchisement (Khoudi & Guendouzi, 2021).

Because Khadra does not provide clear or simple answers, the novel resists stereotypes. The novel explores Sihem's motivations instead of simply portraying her as a monster, and these motivations are connected to the Israel-Palestine conflict and the violence against her community. While the horrible act is never justifiable, it does fit within the narrative of experiences of trauma. Zimman (2019) explains that terrorism in this context is shown as a result of unfairness and humiliation, and not only as something impulsive and unpredictable. According to Khadra, just because one understands doesn't mean they agree, and not understanding can make people seem like symbols of ideologies. What Hamid and Khadra do in their novels is resist the view that terrorism arises from some natural cruelty or lack of progress. The authors say that global terrorism comes from injustices, political conflicts, and identity problems. Many of these authors prefer to focus on the personal rather than the sensational, and they look at what stereotyping, discrimination, and disappointment can do to people emotionally. In this way, they cause readers to think about the factors that encourage such terrorism, rather than the terrorism itself. As Abu-Lughod (2002) points out, these stories work to bring back the fullness of human lives to groups that are stereotyped in the media.

Writers are resisting stereotypes by giving Arab and Muslim individuals feelings and human qualities. Rather than being seen only as victims or villains by others, Changez and Amin seek to change the way readers see Arabs. Fully developed main characters in the novels encourage readers to look past sensationalist views on terrorism and see the effects of conflict, being watched and feeling isolated from one's culture. A shift in how things are shown can break down the ideological system that supports war, discrimination, and excluding social groups (Alsultany, 2012). As a result, such counter-narratives bring to light how harmful it can be to picture Arabs and Muslims as a single group after 9/11. Hamid and Khadra use inner storytelling, uncertainty in the narrative and authentic emotions to prompt readers to think past the term "terrorist" and to understand the interactions between personal pain and politics. The books advance the idea that readers should understand political violence by feeling for those who are harmed and by looking at the social causes of such crimes.

Media, Surveillance, and the Culture of Fear

The Zero, The Reluctant Fundamentalist, and The Attack work together to criticize the way the media and state authorities mobilized fear among the public after September 11, 2001. Every novel highlights the relationship between news media exaggeration and government spying, proving that stories about terrorism stir up anti-Arab and anti-Muslim attitudes and allow for widespread disregard of people's rights. Media messages and political statements that repeat a message of suspicion and hostility help shape the personal and social worlds of the main characters (according to Nacos, 2016). Jess Walter uses The Zero to make fun of the American media's fascination with public events when a national tragedy occurs. Brian Remy, the main character, is caught up in a system that misuses what has happened to him for political and media advantage. The media in the novel is more interested in entertaining than in telling the story straight, so it takes the intricacies of grief and recovery and simplifies them with drama. The character Walter relates Remy's 'blackouts' to the way people become lost in media imagery and lose their true sense of self. In Kellner's view (2004), mainstream media emphasized patriotic symbols and scary stories instead of looking critically at the issues, which created a danger of sidelining different opinions.

Walter states that through cooperation with government bodies, the media helps maintain a sense of fear, which justifies the use of mass surveillance, racial profiling, and armed forces. Through its involvement with an unnamed agency, readers see how trauma was used to help make authoritarianism acceptable. Everybody becomes monitored by the authorities, and any opposition is branded as disloyal. Media outlets help create a sense of crisis and threat from outside, which distracts from the weakening of democratic principles. Such actions show how government bodies reacted to 9/11, for example, through the USA PATRIOT Act, which made it easier for the government to observe individuals but at the cost of civil liberties (Lyon, 2007).

The novel demonstrates that Changez experiences surveillance and ultimately devastating consequences, while having committed no crime. It does not matter how he acts; his race and country of origin always make him suspect. Because the public believes there is a Muslim threat, Changez's high-achieving status and good character do not prevent people from judging him. Instead of being seen as someone's preference, his beard is seen as a reason for concern. This happens because the media usually sees visibility in Muslim men as threatening and dangerous (Alsultany, 2012). He also stresses the emotional burden of always being under surveillance and misinterpreted. Being recognized only as a symbol rather than a person, Changez feels his alienation worsen. He starts being cautious, defensive, and feels threatened whenever he meets Americans. It becomes clear from this how the media-inspired fear affects people's daily interactions. According to Lyon (2018), in the post-9/11 era, surveillance is about government control and also about people disciplining themselves.

Also in The Attack, Khadra investigates how the media and public doubts join forces to destroy Dr. Amin Jaafari's life. While Amin was a reliable surgeon and respected in Israel, people in the media treated him as a villain and a safety risk after his wife detonated her bomb. The media does not try to empathize with his pain or inner conflict and instead makes people think they share blame. Just being Arab is interpreted as involvement in violence. This example brings out how media shapes opinions as it makes some ideas more visible and noticeable by repeatedly reporting them (Khoudi & Guendouzi, 2021). Through her story, Khadra reveals the terrible results when news sources treat people as only part of a group. Because of the way he is now vilified by the public, Amin's sense of self which was built around his job and acceptance, starts to fail. By not acknowledging him as a husband, the press is reflecting a wider lack of respect toward Arabs and

Muslims as people who can experience strong emotions and make good choices. They support actions like more surveillance, banning travel and community policing directed at Muslims worldwide (Cainkar, 2009).

The three novels together make the point that media narratives are not objective. Because of important political, economic and social reasons, fear and suspicion play a big role in the way things are discussed in the post-9/11 period. By bringing out the emotional and social problems in these tales, Walter, Hamid and Khadra make readers reconsider the role media has in influencing the public. They note that stories in the media, fiction, or journalism can either strengthen stereotypes or help break them down. Their books act as counterpoints to the easy assumptions that shaped the media after 9/11.

Ambiguity and the Ethics of Uncertainty

All three novels, The Zero, The Reluctant Fundamentalist, and The Attack, are notable for their willingness to leave things unclear in the plot. They work against the simple and direct messages that are common in political and media narratives after 9/11. Unlike the typical right-versus-wrong situations found in many thrillers, the writers of these books create a blended world of crime, government action, loss, and self where there is no clear moral answer. By doing this, they highlight that straightforward morality is not enough in a globalized, post-traumatic world (Butler, 2004). The Zero by Jess Walter shows narrative fragmentation in its style and in its main themes. Because of Brian Remy's sudden memory loss and lack of understanding, the book explores a nation that is unsettled and wants to make sense of its recent history. The problematic structure makes readers deal with holes, moments of silence and inconsistencies, similar to the characters. It acts as a commentary on the urge for easy moral answers after 9/11, as Walter indicates this might result in dangerous decisions against those held responsible. While dealing with bureaucracy and manipulative media, Remy represents people who are unable to think about where the fault truly lies (Hartnell, 2011).

Mohsin Hamid adds to the ambiguity by how he tells his story in The Reluctant Fundamentalist. The entire text is presented as Changez talking to an American stranger in a café in Lahore. Not hearing what the American says makes the reader imagine the speaker's attitude, which adds tension and prompts the reader to wonder. It is still unknown by the novel's end whether the American is only interested or if he could be a threat, and if Changez is just disappointed abroad or if he may have turned dangerous. Because the books are open-ended, readers have to think about their own ways of interpreting what they read (Mishra, 2006).Uncertainty in Hamid's writing is important not just to add style, but as a way to make political statements. Hamid does not explain Changez's political views, which disturbs the standard classifications of loyalty versus betrayal, Western versus Other, and moderate versus extremist. Being open to discussion helps people study the cultural, political, and feeling-based forces that shape identities after colonial times. Because of this, the novel argues that existing systems are not strong enough to explain the complexities after 9/11 (Puar, 2007).

Just like Brothels, Yasmina Khadra's The Attack ends without giving a clear picture of what happened after Sihem's suicide and what life will be like for Dr. Amin Jaafari. Amin visits Palestinian refugee camps, areas controlled by Israel, and talks to both fighters and government officials, but his search for clarity comes up empty. Not giving a clear ending to the novel mirrors Amin's turmoil and shows that it is impossible to combine personal grief with major political events. According to Khadra, terrorism is not explainable by simple reasons, much like grief (Khoudi & Guendouzi, 2021). In this way, the lack of clarity in the narrative demonstrates that simple choices between friends and foes or citizens and threats are not enough to solve terrorism. The uncertainty and doubts their characters feel are dramatized; all three suggest that an ethics of humility, empathy, and attention to context can overcome these problems. Instead of emphasizing national justice, these stories show readers how uncertain and messy life can be (Bauman, 2007). It is not asking for relativism in morals but for people to reject simple answers and focus on understanding, respect, and talking things through.

Because the novels are vague in certain ways, readers are prompted to think for themselves and form their own opinions. Because they do not state their views clearly, they make people reflect on who they feel is guilty, what is behind a character's actions, and how they deal with differences in society. Because the story ends without a solution, readers are more engaged in trying to figure things out themselves. At present, there is a lot of media focus and political talk about terrorism, which tends to block out any detailed analysis.

According to these books, real understanding and healing start when we admit that we do not have all the answers (Butler, 2006). The Zero, The Reluctant Fundamentalist, and The Attack push for new ways to think about security, justice, and accountability in the 21st century. They contest the idea that you can be 100% sure or certain in either terrorism or its opposition. Instead of giving clear rules, they rely on empathy, history, and reflection, which need some ambiguity to develop. By encouraging readers to share this place, these writers help resist division, support reflection, and reaffirm the presence of humanity today.

Table 1: Comparative Thematic Matrix of Three Post-9/11 Novels

Theme / Element	***The Zero* by Jess Walter**	***The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid**	***The Attack* by Yasmina Khadra**
Narrative Perspective	Fragmented third-person (psychological lens)	First-person dramatic monologue	Third-person with introspective tone
Protagonist	Brian Remy – a disoriented American officer	Changez – a Pakistani professional in the U.S.	Dr. Amin Jaafari – an Arab-Israeli surgeon
Core Conflict	Post-traumatic dissociation and moral confusion	Identity crisis, alienation, and cultural loss	Personal grief vs. political reality
Representation of Blame	Critique of internal scapegoating and media hype	Challenges Western suspicion and profiling	Explores collective guilt and misplaced judgment
Treatment of Trauma	Psychological disintegration	Emotional distancing and loss of belonging	Emotional devastation and betrayal
Stereotype Subversion	Challenges American moral superiority	Humanizes the "suspect" figure	Reveals complexity behind the "terrorist" image
Use of Ambiguity	Fragmented consciousness, unresolved plotlines	Uncertain ending, unreliable narration	Open-ended moral dilemma, no clear answers
Critique of Media & Surveillance	Media manipulation and bureaucratic control	Post-9/11 suspicion culture and gaze	Media-fueled mistrust and racial scapegoating
Ethical Questions Raised	Justice vs. vengeance; truth vs. propaganda	Loyalty, complicity, and dignity	Identity, moral ambiguity, and empathy
Contribution to Counter-Discourse	Internal critique of U.S. society	External critique of Western imperialism	Humanization of Arab voices in Western contexts

Conclusion

A major gap was created by 9/11, shifting international affairs and changing the way people viewed themselves and others. Once the attacks occurred, public talks, news reports, and opinions separated the world into people who were innocent or terrorists, loyal or betrayed, and victims or terrorists. Because the culture was so volatile, literature offered a space to ask questions, consider ideas, and battle for change. In The Zero, Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist, and Yasmina Khadra's The Attack, Jess Walter and others challenge popular views and encourage readers to pay closer attention to the human and emotional aspects of trauma, identity, and conflict. By questioning these clear structures, these novels each come together to reshape post-9/11 discourse. The Zero shows the effect of internal problems within a nation that is having trouble with its identity after a major disaster. The book uses the character's disconnected thinking as a sign of how people can get confused and harmed by trusting too much in nationalism, sensational news, and government power. Rather than celebrating retaliation, the novel teaches readers about the risks of building enemies because of fear and the narrow-mindedness that follows trauma.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist, by comparison, tells the story of a person who is both questioned and ostracized. It urges readers from Western countries to question their views of others, showing how fear, prejudice, and pride can keep people apart, even after they accept the idea of global citizenship. Changez's story is mostly about realizing that his self-worth and cultural background do not fit with the demands and violence of the empire. Because the ending is so vague, the reader is left unsure about what is right or wrong, and no one is clearly good or bad. Emotional anguish from terrorism is vividly shown in The Attack as seen by a man who is forced to decide between love and politics and between loyalty and betrayal. The story humanizes a figure normally portrayed negatively by exploring the reasons that lead to radicalism. Instead of sensationalizing violence, the novel shows grief and sorrow for it. It doesn't justify terrorism, yet it prevents the reader from seeing it as a meaningless, barbaric act, unrelated to important historical events, politics, and individual suffering. The novel shows that receiving partial acceptance, being profiled by race, and facing cultural rejection can wear down the structure of belonging.

All of these works put together a picture of post-9/11 America, highlighting issues such as mental confusion, social exclusion, racial tension, and help from institutions. They do not give us solutions; they help us ask important questions. They do not give us a way to atone; they urge us to reflect on what happened. They are united by their opposition to the stories that oversimplify suffering, excuse violence, and make people fearful. Because they accept that the world is uncertain, they call for a mix of seeking justice with being humble, and guaranteeing security with kindness. These novels point out that literature can play a major role in helping people through times of crisis. When most media stresses being clear, in control, and conquering, literature provides new chances for meaningful conversations, empathy, and ethics. Simply reading exposes us to forgotten stories, lets us face new and different ideas, and aids in developing the empathy we need for living together. They are meant to stir us, not calm us, and to reflect on our trauma seriously and fully.

These novels move the reader's attention from general issues to individual experiences and from politics to emotions, through the stories of American first responders, Pakistani professionals, and Arab doctors. They motivate readers to understand the world by experiencing the daily life of people instead of following a strict ideology. Because of this, they tear down the stereotypes that the era after September 11th tried to establish and instead introduce a new type of narrative that emphasizes context, detail, and the gray area in morals. These novels, in essence, not only cover post-9/11 events; they also act as interventions. They urge us to rethink justice, security, and identity, since too frequently the answer to violence and fear has been more violence and exclusion. Their creative approach and powerful emotions teach us that to learn truly, we should start by questioning our beliefs. By questioning, literature demonstrates its main function: to clarify the unclear parts of our world and, as a result, assist in repairing it with kindness, knowledge, and moral principles.

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